

SAVING THE EARTH (BUT MAINLY SAVING US)

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The thing about saving the Earth — the important thing about saving the Earth — is that it isn't really about saving the Earth. The Earth is in no real danger. It is we humans that are imperiled, along with some of the attributes of the earth we currently enjoy.

We think solutions and salvation comes with more technological prowess, but what may be more important is the ability to weigh the consequences of our actions. One of the rules of physics is you can't go faster than the speed of light. This parallels what could be the first rule of human dynamics, which states you shouldn't go faster than the speed of enlightenment. The first rule, from Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity is immutable; the second one is broken relatively routinely.

Like many of you I often fly on commercial airlines. I board the aircraft and dutifully snap the buckle on my seatbelt shut. I am aware of the safety briefing which is, charitably, a perfunctory bit of due diligence with a box ticked off somewhere in corporate headquarters that we were warned. If we don't heed the warning and read the safety card, well it's on our heads.

None of us have concluded our lives are inexorably governed by the laws of probability and confounded by chaos theory. I'm pretty sure I'll survive, based on past experience and the blind faith that has most of us believing we will win the lottery but never be involved in a car accident.

All of us are passengers in a tube hurtling along, high above the landscape. Somewhere out there in those immense skies other tubes fly filled with people, hopefully not on an intersecting course with ours. But they're on their own; they've had their own safety briefings. Some of them may be on flights that still serve meals. I try not to think of that perk.

When we all arrive safely at a destination of our choice we disembark and all of us, from different tubes, mingle around the luggage carousel with the promise our bags arrived too. We all make little, involuntary sighs of relief or offer silent prayers of thanks for being back on

the earth's surface.

But, on the ground it isn't much different; we're still passengers on a liner hurtling through the cosmos. All the same, except there is no safety briefing. Maybe there should be a safety briefing when we return to Earth. It might make more sense than the perfunctory one we get when we climb into a tube to fly.

What could we include in that safety briefing for the planet we ride on, before we all head home, luggage safely stowed under our arms? How about:

- All of us ride this ship together; no other ships exist.
- Learn more about the craft we are riding on; read all the manuals.
- Consider the limited carrying capacity of this vehicle; don't exceed it.
- Don't lose any of the pieces; there are no replacement parts.
- If you make a mess, clean it up; otherwise, we all sit in it.
- Air, water, soil and biodiversity fuel this ship; don't screw with the fuel.
- Regular inspections and timely maintenance will keep the craft functioning.
- Share space and resources aboard the ship equitably, even with non-human passengers.
- Once on, you can't get off, it's a one-way trip.
- Keep the heat down; some parts of the craft are temperature sensitive.
- Limit your luggage; ask yourself what do you really need.
- Remember, after you're gone, others will be riding on this craft; leave it nice for them.
- Most importantly, it's not politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, atheists, academics, generals, farmers, loggers, plumbers, environmentalists, corporate executives, the right wingers, the left wingers or the buffalo wingers piloting this craft. It's all of us with equal responsibility, accountability and influence.

Many of you are no doubt wondering where I'm going with this very global, very planetary, maybe even galactic line of thinking. We're now on a ride together on the third rock from the sun. Please fasten

your seatbelts.

Perhaps it would be useful to start with some fundamental principles that form the "mighty truths" governing our approach to the world. I first heard these from a colleague, Ron Wallace, and are an elegant summary of what should be on a safety card for review by Earth's inhabitants. They are:

1. What goes around comes around;
2. Everything is connected;
3. Everything is additive;
4. Diversity = stability; and
5. We (humans) are in the loop.

Let's explore them in a bit more detail.

"What goes around comes around" isn't just a cliché; it's an instruction manual. The world is a recycling centre on a massive scale as well as an interconnected web. We breathe the same air and drink the same water as did the dinosaurs and our ancestors. The difference is the air and water of today has been fortified with the exhausts of our industrialized world. A nuclear reactor in Japan suffers an upset and very shortly we all breathe in the result. In the plume from multiple stacks and pipes are heavy metals, toxic chemicals and combinations whose synergistic effects are poorly understood. Once released, the substances are exported over the globe by currents that know no boundaries, provincial or national. This is an unintentional consequence of the global economy, that with benefits come significant costs.

"Everything is connected" speaks to the observation of John Muir who said, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe". We burn fossil fuels, cut down forests and rip up native prairie which store carbon, fail to invest in alternative forms of energy and then watch in amazement as polar ice caps and glaciers melt. Much of humanity is concentrated along coastlines, many of which are, or will be subject to ocean level increases. Climate change, a consequence of the things that flow from our smokestacks and tailpipes means weather patterns have become unpredictable and the weather vicious. The majority of our agriculture, the source of our regular meals, is rain dependent; tinker with that and your plate may not be

full at supper time.

“Everything is additive” including that second dessert or an additional drink. You may also be familiar with issues of bioaccumulation of DDT and other persistent chemicals and the effects on nesting birds and fish. Many of those substances we filter out of air, water and food with our lungs, kidneys and other organs. These things linger, accumulate and magnify in us as well, so that as an example, mother’s milk is now richly infused with persistent organic pollutants, heavy metals and endocrine disrupting chemicals. The effects of all our endeavors are cumulative and inevitably there is a line in the sand followed by a precipice. The science of cumulative effects analysis has progressed to provide us reasonable interpretations of overlaps, what the future trajectories are, given the growth rates of today, and the signals to determine when to stop.

“Diversity equals stability” isn’t just an ecological construct. Diverse systems are inherently more resilient, stable and resistant to perturbations. The principle applies to a forest, a business, to a community and probably to the world. I understand that to succeed in business

you need to identify your particular assets and leverage them to create your own competitive advantage. Alberta’s competitive advantage isn’t solely vested in barley, beef, oil or dimensional lumber. It is our clean air, water, productive soil and biodiversity (and associated ecological goods and services) coupled with an educated and healthy population that provides our strengths. Once we lose that foundation our advantage is gone.

“We humans are in the loop”. Let me incite you with a startling statement. Let’s not kid ourselves that we manage the environment. It is impossible to send a fish on a course to swim better in less water, or a cow to a workshop on sustainable grazing or persuade water to avoid being contaminated. Less startling, but not yet fully understood is that we are not immune from the effects of our own activities. Nothing happens in environmental management until people agree to behave in ways that recognize the effects of their actions. With recognition comes responsibility, and with responsibility eventually comes accountability. Then we will understand the challenge of learning as a modern society how to live the good life on Earth

without abusing the generosity of our hostess.

These five principles underpin everything. They are integrative, unifying and stand as a group to provide order to our thought processes as we try to grasp the complexity of the task. Understanding them does not mean we are granted immunity from their actions. Neither fighting the principles nor ignoring them is an option. You might be able to bargain for short-term relief but over time, acceptance is the only option.

If saving the world and ourselves is worthwhile, these principles form the basis for action. This may be said about maintaining our Earth — the truism that if we want a better world, we will have to become better people. This is a practical, pragmatic, simple, cheap and easily adapted solution to the issues of the globe. All that is required is changing ourselves.

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PHOTOGRAPHY



Thank you to Bill MacKenzie who sent this photo of a group of Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) near Landis, Saskatchewan on May 11, 2025. Did you know that the Pronghorn is the fastest land animal in North America? They can sprint at speeds of up to 95 kilometres per hour and can sustain speeds of 70 km/hr for several kilometres.